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Brexit London: the past, present and future of racism in the capital

On 23rd June 2016, the United Kingdom voted by referendum to leave the European Union. Viewed as the great tragedy of Boris Johnson's elitism, it can also be attributed to at least a century of xenoracism nurtured by successive Labour and Conservative governments.

If Brexit was in part the consequence of decades of racism, it was also the cause of new acts of street discrimination. Following the vote, the Twitter hashtag #PostRefRacism captured a surge in racist incidents as the seemingly timeless maxim "it's not cool to be racist" was scrubbed from its Rock Against Racism social contract.

Like many others living in London, I saw this unfold in daily interactions: two second generation white Irish men talking loudly in a leisure centre about the "dirty" Romanians one had seen trying to "crawl" under the passport desks at Stansted Airport (as he returned from holiday in Spain); a white English man in a café, emboldened not to understand a Hungarian barrista's accent, stood on his own little England until a linguistically appropriate black British employee arrived.

These incidents, and many more like them, begged the question of the kinds of rents Brexit had created in London's social fabric. They asked how we got to this place, and indeed where it was taking us. Focusing on East London, and more specifically the London Borough of Newham, this post responds to those questions by looking at Brexit's past, present, and its future.

Brexit's past

As many will recall, London (as a whole) voted to Remain in the EU. In the London Borough of Newham this was also the case, although the result was much narrower than expected – 6,000 votes the difference between Remain and Leave. In one of the most ethnically diverse parts of the UK, this margin was unexpected. Indeed, Remain campaigner and local Councillor Unmesh Desai took it as a defeat. By contrast, Leave campaigner Emily Knight was "[absolutely delighted](#)" with her loss.

This curious result provides a useful location for thinking about the racist past of the capital, as it does for considering its present and its future.

Lest it be misunderstood as a uniquely contemporary condition, the turn of the previous century was also a period of migration and racism. In Whitechapel and Spitalfields, Jewish refugees were arriving in significant numbers. Fleeing oppression in Prussia and Tsarist Russia, they moved into cheaper parts of the city to take up low paid work in textiles. Like islamophobia today, anti-Semitism was then widespread and the Jewish presence ignited extreme-right activism. In 1902, Captain William Shaw and his British Brothers' League – a paramilitary movement based in Millwall, South East London – campaigned under the slogan "England for the English", achieving the support of Conservative Members of Parliament, and eventually the House of Commons. The House of Commons consequently passed the first ever piece of British immigration legislation – the 1905 Aliens Act.

The First World War's monopoly on nationalist violence took the oxygen from Shaw but at its end another officer, Oswald Mosely, came to prominence. After serving as a Member of Parliament for both Conservative and Labour parties, he formed the fascist New Party and then the British Union of Fascists.

At this time, Newham was home to a relatively diverse population of national and international labour migrants, working the docks of the Thames and the factories of the River Lea. As the Great Depression hit the area, these people were subjected to racial harassment, the virulence of which led British Sri Lankan pastor, [Kamal Chunchie](#) to found the [Coloured Men's Institute](#) in Canning Town. As Chunchie expanded his Methodist ministry, the British Union of Fascists (BUF) turned its ire on the neighbouring Jews blaming them for economic decline. On Sunday 4th October 1936, Mosely's

blackshirts marched through Cable Street, East London, an area of Jewish residence. Here, they met anti-fascists, Jewish Socialists, Irish Dockers, communists and anarchists resulting in the Battle of Cable Street.

After the Second World War's moratorium on organised fascism, successive Conservative and Labour governments continued to provoke racism. In the 1964 General Election campaign, Tory MP Peter Griffith won Smethwick, against a Labour swing, with the campaign "If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour". Returning to the House of Commons, Griffith was lauded by his peers. Not only had he *not* addressed the housing shortages and economic uncertainties that existed around the foundries and factories of the area but he had also used racism to turn working-class people against each other – a theme that was to echo through history.

Four years later, Wolverhampton South West MP Enoch Powell warned prophetically of the consequences of black migration to the UK. Developing his 1964 General Election speech on evils of the "colour question", he drew on US white supremacist discourses around 'black ghettos' and the 1967 'race riots' to portray black working-class people as apolitical, anti-social and detached from mainstream British society. As Paul Gilroy later argued in *Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*, the cumulative effect was to entrench ideas of black detachment to such an extent that they would often obfuscate the representation of black life and experience in any other form.

Through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, these political discourses impinged directly on black and Asian people in East London. As recorded in *The Paint House* (an ethnography of a 1970s East End skinhead gang) black and Asian people were said to be "taking over the area", moving up the social and economic ladder at the expense of the whites, and (a reference to colonial discourse) importing savagery and disease into otherwise civilized and sanitary neighbourhoods. In Newham, the post-World War II 'Golden Era' of full employment was over, and a two-decade period of industrial contraction, rising unemployment and racist attacks began. In the south of the borough, black people had their windows put through until they upped and left. In 1980, skinheads killed Akhtar Ali Baig in East Ham high street and Asian children were racially abused outside Little Ilford School. These actions and others led to the establishment of [Newham Monitoring Project](#), which sought to document and resist these acts.

Building on the fascisms of Mosely and Arnold Leese (Imperial Fascist League), the National Front would consequently find footing in the south of the borough, where they mobilised popular support for anti-black racism. In the 1983 General Election this culminated in [3.7% of the local vote](#). Although the National Front collapsed shortly afterwards, racism did not. John Tyndall's (National Front) east London credibility was built on firmer footings, those dug by Powell; just as the growing popularity of Nicholas Griffin (British National Party) would be shored-up by Thatcher's 1979 "swamping" speech.

Moving into the late 1990s and early 2000s, New Labour's prosecution of the War on Terror, and its failure to redistribute wealth, led to the dual demonization of British Muslims and migrants (particularly asylum seekers). In Newham, Kosovan refugees endured a torrid reception. Asian and Muslim young people joined black youth as the most stopped and searched groups. In 2005, as Gordon Brown blamed the London bombings on the presence of too much diversity, and Jean Charles de Menezes was shot by armed officers at Stockwell tube station for being brown, the police botched an 'anti-terror' raid in Forest Gate. After shooting an innocent resident, they detained two men – Mohammed Abdul Kahar and Abul Koyairfor – who, it transpired, had no connection to terrorist activity.

It was in this way that we arrived at the moment that Labour MP Jack Straw was found out-toughing BNP leader Nicholas Griffin on [Question Time](#); that the Conservatives drove the racist [Go Home Van](#) through poor, ethnically diverse areas of East London; and that migrants, in their thousands, drowned in the Mediterranean because David Cameron could refuse aid to those [Britain had helped terrorise](#). This was also the moment that the EU Referendum was held. Michael Gove's claim that leaving the EU was essential to curb immigration and preserve national harmony; Boris Johnson's (Leave) warning of Turkey (Muslims) joining the EU; and David Cameron's (Remain) play to security (from Muslims) within the EU, merely elaborated on themes developed by Shaw, Mosely, Griffith, Thatcher and Brown. But it was left to Nigel Farage (UKIP) to play the role of Enoch. Channelling his self-declared [political hero](#), a man whose electoral endorsement he had previously sought, he bolstered pan-

European extreme-right discourses. After the sexual attacks in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, he claimed that Syrians posed a risk to British women. He then unveiled his 'Breaking Point' poster. The poster showed a line of humans forced from their homes by war – not to highlight suffering and engender empathy – but to evoke a biblical tide threatening the walls of little England, because, as the subtitle read, "the EU has failed us".

Brexit's present

It was in this context that Newham voted narrowly to Remain in the EU and did so with the capital's lowest voter turnout ([59.2%](#)).

Following the referendum, Lord Ashcroft polled voters on their decisions at the ballot box. Analysis showed that white people were more likely to vote Leave than black and Asian people; and that white people, that voted Leave, were more likely than black and Asian people to see immigration as a problem. It showed that lower skilled and unemployed people were more likely to vote Leave, and that young people tended towards voting Remain (Newham has a relatively large youth population). Areas of longstanding immigration with large youth populations were then more likely to vote Remain; but on the other hand, areas with larger lower skilled and unemployed populations were more likely to vote Leave.

All these demographics correspond to Newham, and it was indeed in this convolution – with respect to the historical context sketched above – that the borough's vote can be understood. Research I published in [Urban Multiculture](#), showed how white residents looked to xenophobic rationales to explain the successive declines and hardships in the area. However, while it showed that hostilities to 'newcomers' were mobilised by those who claimed whiteness (a slippery category itself – see [Chapter 2](#)), related exclusions were also adopted by black and minority ethnic groups, that rejected white supremacy but favoured exclusionary territorial claims – 'I was here first'. This hostility to newcomers then provided an internally discrepant, but nonetheless majoritarian discourse of exclusion.

If this helps explain why a multi-ethnic population might not register a stronger Remain vote, the low voter turnout and the anti-establishment Leave vote, can be understood in relation to the borough's history of marginalisation. A low voter turnout should not be surprising among a working-class, young, black, and minority ethnic population that has been consistently failed by the political system. Nor too should be the related anger ([see chapter 6](#)) that found its outlet in the nihilistic sloganeering of the Leave campaign "[Vote Leave, take control](#)".

In *Urban Multiculture*, this connection between marginalisation, racism, anger and political disaffection was clearly voiced by one of the research participants. Tessa is a middle-aged, female youth worker born and brought up in the south of the borough. Her family had migrated to the area from Scotland, looking for work around the docks. She had worked in the factories of the Lea as a younger woman before arriving at youth work later in life. In a long interview, we discussed the struggles of young people and their families in the local area. She explained to me:

[The parents] do stuff with [their children] on the weekend and they are pretty good with them but you can see the difficulty in it, and it is difficult, and it is all because you've got to have this and you've got to have two cars and you've got to have mobile phones and they've got to go to Spain and Butlins in one fuckin' year. You know, everything's pushed at them. You make money, make money, make people richer and richer and our little society is just falling on its face and what do they do with the kids 'we'll lock them up. Give them an ASBO [Anti Social Behaviour Order] [...]. Give them an ASBO. I really do feel when these people go on about racial harassment. I think come down and [...] see how the East End people have been getting on. I got to go Malcolm, but that's how I feel. I feel that we have been shit on for years and years and years, I really do. So no I don't vote. Fuck 'em. They should have blown up the Houses of Parliament. Guy Fawkes should have succeeded then. ([pg 30-31](#))

Tessa signalled to me the palpable sense of the anger often found in the borough, and its connection to long-term capitalist marginalisation. I have discussed above how this figures through history, but here Tessa addresses its present highlighting the crushing psychic and social affects of neoliberal consumerism, and the contingent criminalisation of working-class people. It is from this position of

rage that she desires to tear down formal politics. It is also from this position that she rationalises racial harassment. In so doing, racism becomes an inevitable and excusable outlet for long-term structural dispossession. Echoing recent sociological popularisms, this fails to take anti-racism seriously – racism has never been inevitable. But more pointedly, it fails to understand how racism has operated through history as a form of governance, a mode of violence, a condition of subjectivity, a repository of anger, a designation of (infra)humanity, and in all these ways a barrier to working-class solidarities. Peter Griffith may well be pleased with his work.

Brexit's future

If this is the past and present of Brexit London, the EU Referendum also offered us a moment to reflect on the future. In *Postmodernism* Jameson argues that architecture, on account of its close relation to capitalism, provides a window onto racial and classed formations; a future already envisioned, but yet to be lived. In Newham, this post-European prospect is the 'Arc of Opportunity'.

Appearing in an economic planning document in 2010, the Arc of Opportunity was announced as 1,412 hectares of land "[stretching from Stratford through Canning Town, the Royal Docks and Beckton](#)", equating to a £22 billion investment in the borough.



Image: Source: <http://albertoduman.wixsite.com/music-masterplanning>

Steeped in the late New Labour language of aspiration (see [chapter 7](#)), the Arc of Opportunity, like other developments in London, is part of a post-European vision for the capital. Long before Teresa May got her Section 50 mandate, architect of the Leave campaign, Boris Johnson, had vaunted this horizon. With the Brussels's bureau of the Daily Telegraph, he had pushed for the [commercial benefits of post-European capitalism](#), and as Mayor of London, he started to make this concrete.

Newham's Arc of Opportunity was the ideal location for this vision. The high proportion of post-industrial land owned and managed by the Greater London Authority and the London Legacy Development Corporation apportioned excellent conditions for a steroid-fuelled building programme. With planning powers held by Johnson himself, international capital (from Canada, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Australia, Netherlands, Qatar, UK, Germany, Ireland, Singapore and China) could be attracted to housing, transport, business, arts and shopping developments with minimal local accountability. In the south of the borough, these developments now include Silvertown Quays, Royal Wharf, Siemens Crystal exhibition centre, and the Asian Business Port – touted as London's third financial centre. In the west, it takes in the Olympic development, six housing villages and Westfield shopping centre.

At the 2010 Shanghai Expo, Newham Council branded the Arc of Opportunity a “[regeneration supernova](#)”. Commenting on this, Dan Hancox writes, “is not about ‘modifying’, ‘modernising’ or ‘improving’ a run-down area. No: It is about wiping it out in a ‘supernova’ – a brief moment of total and blinding destruction”. East London, of course, has historic precedent for this – the Victorian sanitation projects, post-World War II ‘slum’ clearances, the imposition of high-rise blocks and then their condemnation. Working-class places like Newham have long been ripe for violent aesthetic and architectural reinvention by those who don't live there.

Envisioned in boardrooms, distributed at international business fairs, and beamed between the ever-increasing skyscrapers of the 0.1%, the ‘regeneration supervova’ takes form far above everyday urban realities. From this place of near-total detachment, an architectural and aesthetic blueprint is drawn up; a blueprint designed to obliterate human histories the visionaries care not to know. Tested during the 2012 Olympics, this blinding commercial light was applied to Carpenters Housing Estate and the Stratford Centre. The former, a onetime home to Newham residents was saturated with advising hoardings; the latter, a popular low cost market, shopping centre, public thoroughfare and night time skate park, was hidden by shiny fins. Both have been vanquished from Newham's rear view mirror.



Stratford Centre covered with shiny fins

Around the Olympic Park today, there are plans for V&A and Smithsonian Museum, University campuses, and the Sadler's Wells auditorium. These popularist creative and cultural projects come flanked by two 47-storey luxury apartment towers. At the Royal Docks, the clean lines of the Siemens

Crystal sustainable exhibition centre look across the water to London City Airport, the Asian Business Port and the new offices of Sir Robin Wales' local authority.

That the popular, clean, creative and commercial appeal of these edifices bears no relation to the borough's present, or indeed its past, should worry us indeed. Gone is the dirt of the docks and the Lea and so too the people that made it. The Arc of Opportunity's clean façades, cultural zones, warehouse educational establishments, and of course shopping, are predicated directly on the exclusion of the working-class and multi-ethnic population that lives in the area (even if a sanitised version of ethnic diversity for sale is key to its aspiration). If Mayor of Newham, Robin Wales has his way and "the middle classes...[keep] swarming into our borough at a rate of knots", what this architecture tells us is that the current residents of Newham will be viewed as matter out of place, dirt to be cleansed, creases in the lines, not part of the future, or indeed the past.

Decoupling entirely from a welfarist commitment to mutual co-existence (see Gargi Bhattacharyya forthcoming on ['racial capitalism'](#)), a Newham, wholly unaffordable for the majority of its inhabitants, is being built. Today, the price of a 2-bedroom house in Olympic East Village is £580,000, an intermediate rent for the same size is £1,404 per month, and the social rent £754 per month. However, the median wage in Newham is only [£882.29 per month](#). This would make a social rent in East Village an enormous 85% of a monthly wage – very far from sustainable. And indeed these are the better deals. After Boris Johnson took over housing planning at the Olympic Park, affordable and social rented properties decreased by 21%. Now 61% of homes are for the private market with 29% divided between social rent, "affordable rent" and shared ownership. Under the Housing and Planning Act 2016, these inequalities will worsen still as local authorities sell off social housing stock to fund new building projects.

If the forced removal of residents from Carpenters Estate showed the willingness of the council to take on high profile and well-organised resistance (and Russell Brand), to achieve its future vision, less reported will be the social violence that these new high-rent developments bring to some of the poorest parts of the capital. As private land is repurposed for housing, high art, international business, creative industries, higher education and shopping, and Robin Wales' much hoped for middle classes throng, racial and classed violence will be meted out.

The precedents for this are already in place. As I wrote in 2012, we only have to cast our eyes back to the Olympics to imagine how this might transpire:

As the Olympics entered its second week, I walked through West Ham Park, ten minutes from the main site, and stopped to speak to a group of Afghani and Kurdish young men sitting on a bench under a tree. Interested in the actions of the police, I asked how the Olympics were affecting them. Rather than trot out TV derived platitudes of patriotism and aspiration, they expressed anger at being stopped (on the pretext of immigration checks), harassed, and illegally strip-searched in the backs of police vans. These were not new experiences but the Olympic Games had increased their frequency to absurd levels. Affronted and angry, they shared stories and reflections on the clean-up, its racial registers and its basis in their day-to-day marginalisation. In the glare of neoliberal whiteness, they noted how their brown bodies and associated cultural signifiers had become hyper visible. (pg 114)

Brexit then provides a moment to reflect on the past, present and future of racism in the capital. Against the myopic shock and delight of the two referendum campaigns, it shows how the racism that emerged in the early summer of 2016, had a very long and twisted tail. However, it also gives pause to reflect on the future of the same moment. In Newham, East London, the racist future of the capital is being built on post-European grounds. A populist post-welfare capitalism, with sharp aesthetics and a violent disregard for its own population and history is taking shape. Built into this is the authority on which racial and classed violence will be distributed for years to come.

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Malcolm James is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies. He's the author of [Urban Multiculture: youth, politics and cultural transformation in a global city](#). He tweets at [@Mookron](#).